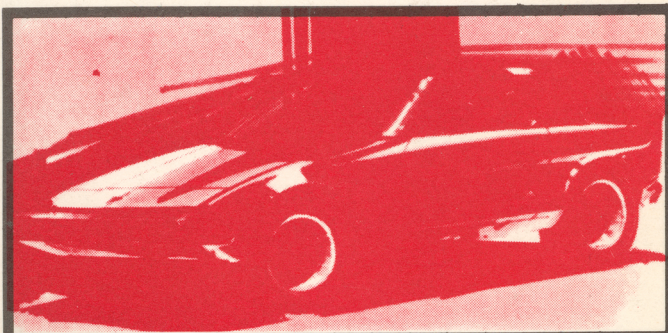


What Happened at SPEKE?



*"A car designed on the
basis of major motoring
needs for the next
twenty years."*

**BRITISH
LEYLAND**

What Happened at **SPEKE?**

HUW BEYNON

Drawings by Brian O'Toole

This Report, on the closure of the British Leyland
Liverpool (Speke) No. 2 plant, was commissioned by,
and written in association with, the officers and
members of the 6-612 Branch of the TGWU.

published by 6-612 Branch, TGWU
Liverpool, 1978

© 6-612 Branch TGWU

Printed by Feb Edge Litho Printers (TU all depts),
3-4 The Oval, London E2.

INTRODUCTION

If British Leyland cannot survive, the motor industry in this country will be taken over by the American multi-nationals who have no allegiance to Britain whatsoever. For this reason alone the closure of one of British Leyland's most modern plants is a cause for concern for the whole of the British Labour movement. This booklet prints a number of facts about the closure:

- The fact that the workers at British Leyland Speke No. 2 factory were never opposed to improving the viability of their plant or British Leyland as a whole. What was debatable though, were the methods used. Apparently pulling together is acceptable providing everybody pulls the same way as management.
- The fact that on one hand management claimed the plant was overmanned yet admitted the manning standards were amongst the tightest in Leyland cars.
- The fact that the Stag, a car that sold so well that we could not produce enough, was scrapped.
- The fact that millions of pounds were spent on designing and bringing to production stage a brand new model — the Lynx — which was scheduled to be built at Liverpool but then 'canned'.
- The fact that the TR7 had gone through successive modifications in its production period at Liverpool, that the modified car could and should have been produced in Liverpool.
- The fact that the N.E.B., although initially set up to operate socialist industrial policies increasingly operates like a capitalist merchant bank. As the main owner of British Leyland the N.E.B. is dictating the kind of policies followed in the company.

For these reasons the 6/612 Branch of the TGWU is calling for a PUBLIC ENQUIRY into the closure of the Speke factory. British Leyland is "publicly owned" and the decision to close down a factory should be publicly examined.

All these and many other questions are posed in the booklet and I trust when you read it you will learn from our misfortune. We have printed the story so that our lessons may be helpful to other workers. Even if it's only to understand that the tinsel on the redundancy "carrot" soon loses its sparkle. *Nobody* will defend your jobs if you as workers won't fight for them.

Frank Banton,
Secretary,
6-612 Branch
TGWU.

ONE THE CLOSURE OF SPEKE

On May 26th 1978 British Leyland's Speke No. 2 plant in Liverpool closed down. The last TR7 had rolled off the assembly line. Three thousand of the most highly paid manual workers on Merseyside were unemployed. The *Liverpool Echo* (a newspaper not known for the sympathy it has shown to the Leyland workers in the past) put it like this:

Production of the controversial wedge-shaped sports car — designed to conquer the American market — will continue at Coventry but for the Liverpool car men the dole queue looms, with only a limp Leyland golden handshake to soften the blow.

And more than the car men will be affected. The manual workers at Speke are unemployed but the managers (and some supervisory grades) have been retained by the company — but not in Liverpool. Taken together the Speke closure has led to the direct loss of some 4,000 jobs on Merseyside. And this is just the beginning. To this figure must be added the people who were indirectly involved through servicing and producing for, the Speke plant — while most of the component suppliers, are based in the Midlands, some were based on Merseyside, as were the Laundry and Canteen contractors. A lot of work goes into a car plant. But again, this isn't all. The immediate effect of the plant's closure has been that weekly wages of something like £400,000 are no longer being paid. Part of this is compensated for by redundancy payment and the dole but one inescapable fact remains: the amount of money circulating on Merseyside has dropped substantially as a result of the closure. Pretty soon, small shopkeepers in the South of the city will be feeling the pinch. In this way the 3,000 redundancies *expands*: less work in component firms, less need for milkmen, fewer openings for school leavers in hairdressing shops, boutiques... The effect of the closure upon the Merseyside economy and upon the men themselves has still to be counted. As one man put it:

the bitterness hasn't set in yet. You'll have to wait about six months until you see the bitterness.

The closure has left a lot of people angry and confused. Angry because of the way they have been treated, particularly because of the way they have been manipulated by the corporate bosses. Confused to know why a brand new plant should be put up and closed down in under ten years; to stand idle and empty on the edge of Liverpool.

It's a car plant, a purpose built plant and it's just standing there. It's the waste

that gets me. The amount of money — public money — that must have gone into that place.

British Leyland is almost wholly owned by the National Enterprise Board, a body which was set up specifically for the purpose of social planning. Leading trade unionists sit on the Board. One of its clearest aims was to develop policies which aided areas of high unemployment. Yet the Speke plant (situated in one of the areas of highest unemployment in the country) was closed down. It's not surprising that people are asking "why was it allowed to happen?"

Clearly the closure of the Speke plant raises some searching questions: Not only for Leyland workers but for trade unionists and the Labour movement generally. In fact for anyone who is worried about the prospect of jobs and employment in the future. More than any one specific event for some time it poses the question: "Where are we going?" On Merseyside, for example, people are sure that there are more plant closures to come within Leyland, and that it is important that all Leyland workers understand how company strategy can effectively isolate the workforce of a single plant. If the trend which is being established within British Leyland is to be checked, lessons must be learned from the experience of Speke. More was involved in this closure than the machinations of big business. Leyland is controlled by the N.E.B. and the Speke closure raises important questions about this — the new "nationalisation" — and the role that trade union officials and government ministers play in it. What this also raises — through the spectre of severe unemployment in areas like Merseyside — are questions about the industrial and political strategy of the whole Labour movement. How are plant closures and unemployment to be resisted? Leyland management claimed that the closure of Speke was "inevitable". To an extent trade union officials were also convinced by this. But what makes unemployment inevitable? On the basis of their experiences at Speke many workers question any logic of inevitability. So too does the Liverpool Trades Council. But how can we fight against the forces which push this logic? It is hoped that some pointers will come from answering the question: "What happened at Speke?"



There is a short answer to the question about Speke the workers got boxed off and the management closed down the plant without a struggle. But this short answer invites a series of additional questions — why was the company concerned to close the plant? How were managers able to "box off" Speke so effectively? To answer these we have to take a broader view. To quote one of the men involved, 'To explain it all you've got to go back to the beginning every time; everything leads back and back'. This will be the main concern (and purpose) of this booklet. To examine, in detail, the forces which led up to the Speke closure. To look into the reasons why it was seen to be inevitable, and outline the workers arguments against this. Before beginning this however it will be useful to make clear the main events in the drama.

Nineteen seventy seven was a bad year for the men who worked in the No. 2 plant at Speke. The year began well enough with two full months work during January and February. In March, however, they were laid off for three weeks as a result of the toolmakers strike. Work resumed again and lasted through to the two holiday breaks in June and July. In September though there was another three week lay off to be followed by five days work and another lay off which lasted the best part of October. On their return this time they found themselves in the middle of a dispute over manning arrangements. Management had decided to take a tough line in negotiations. The stewards recommended strike action and the plant was on stop again. This time for seventeen weeks. It was during that strike that the Northern correspondent of *The Times* wrote:

Nobody except Mr Michael Edwardes, chairman of British Leyland, a handful of his senior executives and possibly one or two ministers and senior members of the National Enterprise Board yet knows whether the new plans for British Leyland include closure of the Triumph car plant at Speke, Liverpool.

Two things can be said about it with certainty. The first is that a lot of people on Merseyside — among them many of the 6,000 who work at Speke — are already convinced that Mr Edwardes would like to shut it down. The second is that the moment any concrete evidence of this appears all hell will break loose among politicians, trade unions, industrial planning bodies and local authorities.

As it turned out, the suspicions of the people on Merseyside proved correct, however, the writer was off the mark with his second prediction. The 'politicians, trade unions, industrial planning bodies and local authorities' took the news of the closure rather calmly.

The closure was announced during the fifteenth week of the strike. In these circumstances a mass meeting of the workforce decided to return to work in order to organise a fight against the closure. At that time there was talk of "generous" redundancy payments; in April, however, when the extent of the company's generosity was announced there was an overwhelming vote in favour of rejecting the proposals; of fighting to save the plant. Within a month the vote was overturned—some say—by three to one; others put it at sixty-forty. A lot can happen in a month. At Speke the company cleverly altered the redundancy terms and the national union officials did an about-face, insisting that the Speke workers had been offered all they were likely to get and should accept the closure. It *did* all seem "inevitable". The closure and Leyland's handshake was accepted.

If this sets the scene let us now turn and look at the picture a little more closely.

TWO BRITISH LEYLAND: From BMC to NEB

Over the past ten years, from the time of its formation in 1968 the British Leyland Motor Company has never been far from the headlines. In this time there has been an official investigation into the company (The Ryder report) as well as detailed investigations into the overall state of the motor industry by the government's "Think Tank" and the Expenditure Committee of the House of Commons. The crisis in the motor industry — and particularly as it affected the last British owned motor company — lay near to the heart of the British crisis.

Since the early 1960's the British Motor industry has become increasingly competitive and increasingly international. Companies like Ford now produce on a European basis. European markets have been subjected to intense model competition from European producers and Japanese imports. In Britain, Leyland's market share dropped from 50% in 1968 to 30% in 1975 and 24% in 1977. It was in this context that British Leyland collapsed to be resuscitated by the Labour Government's National Enterprise Board.

The Leyland Crisis

Many factors contributed to British Leyland's bankruptcy. The popular press blamed the workforce. But Ford employs British workers—and has had its problems with them. Ford however retains financial viability. The roots of Leyland's crisis went deeper. Unlike Ford British Leyland was produced through a series of mergers in the fifties and sixties — Austin, Morris, Pressed Steel, Rover, Jaguar, Leyland, Triumph.... — and ended up with a wide span of loosely co-ordinated plants, models and payment systems. These plants were brought together under a managerial structure (dominated by Lord Stokes' presence at the apex) which left much to be desired. At Speke, before the N.E.B. takeover, workers were finding that even the most trivial complaint or request was referred to higher authority. When, for example, paint sprayers requested that the company provide them with baseball boots they found their request being dealt with by the area manager! This point was taken up in 1978 by the *Financial Times*.

Among the things which have gone wrong with the car side of British Leyland since the creation of the Company in 1968 most people would single out industrial relations and the weakness of the product range. But it is arguable that an equally serious problem has been the continuing uncertainty over organisation. Several different structures have been tried and none of them have lasted more than two or three years, with damaging consequences for morale and management performance.

A further and deeper problem, had to do with the level of investment. Since 1974 British Leyland has invested something like £500 in new capital equipment for every one of the workers it employs (in the previous four years, the figure was half of this). The other major European-owned corporation (Volkswagen, Fiat and Renault) invest twice as much. In the U.K. market British Leyland's main competitor — Ford — has, over the past ten years consistently invested many times more funds in capital stock in its U.K. plants. Men who came to work at Speke after Ford's Halewood plant, noticed the difference:

To be honest with you I couldn't believe it. I came here in 1973 and I had always thought that one car plant was very much like another. I hadn't believed people when they said that Standards were so different. But they were bloody right. At Ford's we might be pulling fifty or sixty cars an hour in the lines — at Standards we were doing twelve. It was completely different.

Another man — who had worked as a "metal man" at Halewood — agreed:

I had been a metal man at Ford's — you know I was responsible for flattening out any bumps or dents in the metal. When I went to Standards I asked to go on the same job and I was put on there for a sort of probationary period. When I got there I thought I'd get the sack — there were no tools. All the special hammers and things which we used at Ford's they didn't have them — they'd never heard of them. At Ford's if you had a door with the panel with a crease in it they had a tool which you used to straighten it out. At Standards they would just scrap those doors — throw them in a pile: scrap.

Little things you know. At Ford we had proper spectacles with a case. You'd keep them in your case. At Standards they supplied plastic ones that were too bulky to put in your pocket — blokes would keep them in their toolbox and they'd get scratched.... We ended up using the procedure to fight for tools and the proper equipment to do the job: equipment which should have been there, provided for us.

The Ryder Report

In 1974, in the face of the growing vulnerability of British Leyland, Tony Benn initiated an inquiry into the company's affairs. In their evidence to the committee (evidence which appeared in a new form under the final trade union proposals) the British Leyland shop stewards argued that the root of British Leyland's vulnerability lay in under-investment and the lack of an integrated production process within the company. The shop stewards pressed the claim for "a planned capital investment programme supported by public funds" and the "full democratic control" of the company — achieved through a Board of Directors "constructed of one third elected or supported by trade unions, one third government representatives, one third management specialists appointed by the government and ultimately agreed by both the government and trade unions involved".

Ryder took the point about investment but insisted that there should be no loss of executive responsibility within the company. The report was firmly opposed to the idea of a "joint management/union committee at corporate

level" and made it clear that:

we have tried to devise machinery which will result in positive agreed action, without eroding management's executive responsibility.... executive responsibility rests with management.

Ryder's proposals called for the establishment of Leyland Cars as a major division within the company and within that division for the rationalisation of production between the particular plants.

for human and financial considerations, BL clearly cannot start afresh and plan new plant layouts on "green field" sites with all assembly and finishing operations in one place. BL has to live with its existing plants.

On this basis, together with some rather optimistic economic forecasting, Ryder predicted the stable growth of British Leyland into the 1980's. A point of view shared by Harold Wilson.

The Ryder Committee believes that we could have a much bigger market for the vehicle industry. That is why we are confident that if the recommendations of the report are implemented it will lead to no lasting loss of jobs opportunities, and that the Leyland workforce.... in the early 1980's will be as great as it is today.

Things, however, didn't quite turn out that way.

The National Enterprise Board

Discussion of Ryder and the future of British Leyland was precipitated by the bankruptcy of the company. Through the intervention of the N.E.B., the government replaced £200 million of the company's interest bearing stock with £200 million of equity shares in which the group was not required to pay interest until 1980. In this way the N.E.B. became a 95% shareholder in British Leyland. In the 1973 Labour Party manifesto the National Enterprise Board was seen as the lynch-pin of a new socialist industrial strategy:

It (the N.E.B.) will for the first time provide an instrument for exercising control in the area of profitable manufacturing industry. It offers opportunities to pursue new paths in job creation, in more effective regional policies, and in the achievement of greater public accountability over a wide area of society.

By 1975, however, the N.E.B. had been scaled down in both purpose and extent. In 1973 Tony Benn was talking about an annual influx of £1,000 million of public capital. The Board was granted that sum over an indefinite period. Harold Wilson's preamble to the White Paper made it clear that the N.E.B. was not a threat to big business. Britain needed "both efficient, publicly owned industries and a vigorous, alert, responsible and profitable private sector". Benn was replaced by Varley and, in spite of the manifesto's insistence that appointments to the Board be made "not via the traditional inner circuit of personal contacts, but by much more open methods", the first appointments were predictable enough.

The Chairman of the Board, appointed by Harold Wilson on a salary of

£31,850 was Lord Ryder. His deputy (who was to take over after Ryder's resignation) was Leslie Murphy who, at sixty had reached retirement age at Schroders the Merchant Bankers. These two were to be assisted by part-time Board members each paid £1,000 a year. The first nine part-time members were William Duncan of I.C.I., John Dickinson the former managing director of SKF, Michael Edwardes, Chairman and Chief Executive of Chloride, John Gardner, managing director of the Laird Group and three trade union officials, David Basnett of the GMWU, Harry Urwin of the TGWU and John Lyons of the EPEA.

Under this direction the N.E.B. has, in the words of its present Chairman, increasingly seen its role to involve merely "the provision of finance for industrial investment", a fact echoed by the *Financial Times*:

The idea is that when the N.E.B. injects cash into a company and takes a share stake, it should be able to agree then to resell this holding later if other shareholders wanted to buy it. (*Financial Times*)

In practice therefore, the N.E.B., was established as a publicly owned merchant bank: operating with principles which differ in no substantial way from privately owned institutions of that sort. In September 1977 a Tory M.P., Tom King stated that:

The private sector has been fighting hard to prevent profit from becoming a dirty word, and is beginning to win. It would be disastrous if the same battle were now lost in the public sector. (quoted in the *Sunday Times* 21st September 1977)

It seems clear that the N.E.B. was equally convinced of the need to fight for profitability in the public sector: and British Leyland became a test case for this strategy. The company was going to have to succeed in competition with "vigorous, alert" companies like Ford. It was going to have to become like Ford — quickly. Under the N.E.B. the old Stokes brigade was replaced. John Barber the managing director left grumbling (in spite of the compensation of £125,000 he received) and Sir Richard Dobson was brought in from British American Tobacco. In an interview in *The Times* he made it clear that:

it was better for Leyland to have a businessman and a Tory at the head of it than to have a civil servant or even a committed socialist. My dream would be to see Leyland so profitable that its shares could again be distributed, perhaps under a different government, perhaps under a similar one, to the general public as a worthwhile investment. (*The Times*, 10th May 1976)

His dream, however, had a nightmarish look about it in 1977. Under Ryder's chairmanship, all new funds provided by the N.E.B. were dependent upon matching funds being generated within the company. In spite of a substantial reduction in manning (some 50,000 in eighteen months) the funds were not forthcoming. By early 1977 *The Times* saw "the Ryder plan in ruins". A reality confirmed at the end of the year with the appointment of Michael Edwardes as Chairman.

The Arrival of Edwardes

The position of the manager within these giant corporations has been examined recently by Michael Maccoby in his book. *The Gamesmen: the new corporate leaders*. In his view the giant corporations are increasingly controlled by men who he types as gamesmen. A typical corporate boss has a character which is:

a collection of near paradoxes. He is co-operative but competitive; detached and playful but compulsively driven to succeed; a team player but a would-be superstar; a team leader but often a rebel against bureaucratic hierarchy; fair and unprejudiced but contemptuous of weakness; tough and dominating but not destructive....

Detachment protects the gamesman from being too involved with other people's problems and emotions. One manager was flabbergasted by the idea that he should be so involved: "If I let myself feel their problems, I'd never get anything done. It would be impossible to deal with people". In Michael Edwardes, the Labour Government provided British Leyland — and its workforce, with a high-powered gamesman of their own. As *The Times* put it:

Mr Michael Edwardes... is clearly a determined ambitious and, on past record, effective operator. For the moment the Government, the Department of Industry and his major shareholder, the N.E.B., have indicated responsibility to him for finding a way of containing the accelerated deterioration in the company's prospects.

A point that was echoed by the *Sunday Times*:

with time running out nobody doubts that Edwardes is the man who will make, or break, British Leyland.

Edwardes was, personally, in a strong position. As one senior manager put it: "after all, he is only on secondment and can always walk out back to Chloride". In this situation the financial press agreed with the assessment of *The Observer*.

The company will almost inevitably be slimmed down in management and workforce, as loss makers are trimmed and the organisation readjusted to suit a lower market share.

In this trimming down operation Edwardes directed his attention at his fellow corporate chiefs. All senior managers up to director level were subjected to psychological analysis to see how well they were suited to the new environment. A lot of them left. Included in the number were Alex Park (the former Chief Executive) who left for Lonrho, Gerry Wright the finance director, Derek Whittaker (the former head of Leyland cars) who went with Gerry Clancy (director of parts) and Des Norton (director of Cowley) to GKN, and Keith Hopkins the former marketing director of Austin Morris.

The new game was to be a tough game. In January 1978 Edwardes made it clear that while he would seek the co-operation of the unions in the implementation of his decisions he would, if opposed, "insist on full government backing before taking action to enforce urgently needed cut backs". The financial press,

P. O. Toole '78.

MICK THE KNIFE



at least, were sure that such support would be forthcoming. As *The Economist* put it:

Mr Edwardes may have had the nod from Mr Callaghan to play it tough. The government is known to "want a solution to the Leyland problem wrapped up by early spring". (*The Economist*, 14th January 1978)

In his first meeting with the national officials of the unions in January 1978 Edwardes was quite forthright.

I do not propose to manage by confrontation. The style of management will be participative, but we haven't got time and we can't have prolonged discussions — decisions must be made fast.

I am not here to negotiate — merely to tell you what is on my mind and to hear your views. The idea that we should agree to produce the number of vehicles that fits the number of people we employ isn't on.

The situation was clear. The Ryder proposals were to be overturned. The car division (the group basis for Ryder's expansion of volume production) was to be split once again, and profit centres established. Loss makers were to be identified and weeded out. After the meeting Grenville Hawley of the TGWU described the situation as "rather fluid". John Rowan of TASS put it more forcefully:

The company is being chopped up so that its enemies can pull it to bits, piecemeal.... Leyland cars is (already) too small in international terms, and to make it smaller will make it weaker and easier to kill. (*The Guardian*, 17th January 1977)

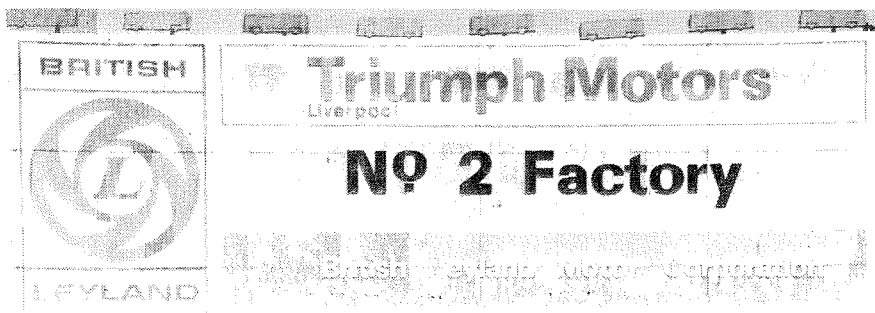
And Speke was the first to be killed.

THREE THE SPEKE PLANT: Opened and Closed

The closure of Speke has to be understood within the context of the overall crisis of British Leyland. And to understand why Speke was the first to go we need to look deeper still.

In the 1960's both Tory and Labour governments operated with ideas of encouraging new industries to the regions where unemployment was highest. This encouragement was achieved through a mixture of the carrot (a whole series of grants, loans and allowances together with the possibility of a cheaper labour force) and the stick (the refusal of permits for building factories in the South). The motor industry — a key growth industry in this period — was strongly affected by those policies. Ford set up shop at Halewood and Swansea, Rootes opened at Linwood, Vauxhall at Ellesmere Port, and Triumph at Speke. Usually the companies complained, but accepted the advantages that the schemes provided. The money was a help but apart from this the dispersal of the new plants also succeeded in dispersing the motor industry's labour force during a period of boom. It is not difficult to imagine the kind of union organisation — and wages explosion — that would have developed if all those plants had been built in and around the Midlands. So there was a lot in it for the Corporations. But whereas Ford and Vauxhall (GM) established integrated production units on their new sites, the British owned companies established under-capitalised units. Speke is the clearest example of this.

The Opening of Speke No. 2



The Standard Triumph Company has its historical roots at Coventry in the Midlands. In the 1950's it had acquired a factory on the Speke estate. It opened in 1959 employing 900 men and making Triumph body parts. In 1960 a £3,400,000 extension created the press shop and body plant that makes up the

No. 1 plant.

Liverpool had its first car plant. It was toward the Speke estate that the company turned when it decided to build a new assembly plant in the 1960's. Unable to develop in Coventry it took up the offer by the local authority to provide a suitable site adjacent to the body plant. The site was levelled at the same time as the Ford site at Halewood: however production at Halewood was well under way before a brick had been laid at Speke. In this time Standard went bankrupt and were taken over by Leyland. The decision on the plant was delayed and delayed.

That site was levelled at the same time as Ford's; but our plant didn't open until 1969 where as the Ford plant was in production in 1962. I don't believe personally that they wanted to come here; it was always a temporary kind of arrangement for them.

The plant was eventually built and Labour was recruited. But to the men who worked there first it seemed a funny sort of a factory.

The first thing that struck me when I went into the place and started there was its prefabricated nature, you know, a thrown up job.

Another man noted that:

The factory was built into sections, not like Ford's. It's a plant that, if it's got to be sold it could be sold off separately. You'd have the same main roadway, the same gateway, but you could sell a third of the plant or a quarter of the plant and it could be a complete unit.

It just didn't seem as if they'd come to stay.

The new plant consisted of a body plant which welded together the sections of the body shell, a paint shop where the body was painted, a sewing room which produced the cushions for the seats and the rest of the interior trim, and a trim and final assembly plant which completed the car. The site as a whole relied upon the plants in the Midlands for axles, engines and transmission units, which completed the car. But for many years Speke (severely under-capitalised) never operated as an integrated production unit. Rather, assembly production was split between the Speke No. 2 plant and the other assembly plant at Canley. Production at Speke was always part-production: the TR6, the Stag, the Dolomite range were all part-produced at Speke and shipped on rail (in various stages of completion) to the Midlands to be finished. It was not until the early 1970's, with the production of the Toledo, that the Speke plant produced a motor car on wheels. In contrast, Ford at Halewood and GM at Ellesmere Port operated with integrated production units, producing a range of cars from start to finish. Speke typified the historical problems of British Leyland — under-capitalised, unintegrated production and organisation which had to be dealt with in the 1970's. British Leyland — and Speke — had to be *rationalised*.

Rationalisation at Speke

Production in British Leyland was to be rationalised. But there is more to this process than constructing particular models in particular plants. In particular

this rationalisation was accompanied by the increasing *Fordisation* of British Leyland. For one thing, management changed as the new-look Leyland recruited from outside. One worker remembers how:

This place was friendly once but it isn't now. They started bringing departmental managers in from the American firms. There was a fellow come into the Paint Shop from Chrysler's down in the Midlands, a fellow called Tony Potter came as a plant director from Vauxhall's at Ellesmere Port. Then Potter got the sack and we got Skinner from Ford Halewood. When they started coming in I could see a change in the system. It didn't happen overnight but it gradually turned into a system which I used to see in Fords. As soon as a manager came on the scene the foremen shit themselves.

This change in management personnel, built upon another change that had been implemented before the crash. Traditionally, British Leyland like other engineering firms in this country, have paid wages through a form of piece work. These piece rates were originally introduced by the employers as a means of regulating and controlling the workforce through the wage. Over the years however a number of things happened. In good times (like the 1960's) workers were able to force up the rate using their bargaining strength at every moment the piece rate was adjusted. Also, the workers learned to turn the logic of the payment system to their own advantage. Payment by the piece means what it says. You get paid according to the number of units (or pieces) you produce. As such you can (to an extent) run the job to your own pace — faster or slower. You can take breaks because (in the theory of it) the loss is your own. Detailed supervision of the job has no part to play in the piece work system; the worker can, with logic on his side, tell the foreman where to get off if he presses too hard for more production.

For these reasons Ford has never paid piece rates; for these reasons too British Leyland was determined in the 1970's to replace this payment system with a fixed hourly rate, introduced (through the "Scientific" study of jobs) under a measured day work system. Such a system was introduced into the two Speke plants in November 1973. The P.E.P. agreement stated clearly that:

In order that production may be planned, industrial engineering procedures shall be used to study work, improve methods, measure work, establish standards and to assign work in direct and indirect occupations on a continuing basis.

The negotiations which led up to the agreement had been long and hard. The company insisted on their determination to introduce a Measured Day Work system and that they were prepared to "buy out" established piece rates through a high hourly rate. After much opposition several of the biggest plants in the Leyland group had agreed to the change. At Speke the shop stewards were far from happy about the change. Again, the experience of Ford Halewood was important.

Quite a few of us had had first hand experience of a Measured Day Work system as operated by Ford. We know what it could mean if you like; the foreman with the whip hand sort of thing. And shall I say we were far from

happy about the prospect of working under such a system at Standards.

Under a Measured Day Work system, each part of the job is timed, analysed and rated. On the basis of these (often complicated) calculations, work is allocated to men on the shop floor. If a job is timed at 5 minutes a man may be expected to perform it twelve times in an hour; if at one minute, sixty times and so on. Under such a system the job *timings* take on a crucial significance. Ford has consistently refused to negotiate over such timing, claiming them to be scientific and part of management's responsibility. Workers the world over have found themselves questioning these assumptions: questioning the numbers that came out of management's stop watch. At Speke, under the 1973 agreement, the workers formally won the right to *mutually* determine the timings for *their* jobs with management. Clause 4.3.4 of the Agreement reads:

As soon as possible after a study of the task, the Industrial Engineer will consult the Foreman, who will inform the shop steward(s) and the operator or group of operators of the standard time and/or manning levels, and providing agreement is reached the work will proceed.



Triumph Motor Company
(Liverpool) Ltd.

PROTECTED EARNINGS PLAN



Supercover.

November, 1973.

Subsequent clauses made reference to the importance of “genuine and constructive” attempts being made to resolve any disagreements. The weighting of the package was clear though — at Speke “measurement” had to be discussed and agreed, it was not to be a managerial dictate. More of this in a moment.

The third change which took place at Speke in the 1970’s related directly to the introduction of the TR7 and the rationalisation of models throughout the group. In this programme Speke was to cease being a part-production plant and become:

A dedicated sports car manufacturing location (set up) to produce a unique range comprising TR7 and various derivatives....with anticipated sales of 80,000 per annum i.e. 1950 per week.

In this way the future of the No. 2 plant became intricately bound up with the wedge shaped sports car: a car that, in a way few people anticipated, was to provide “the shape of things to come”.

“Rationalisation” under capitalism is no neutral process — it operates hand in glove with the profit motive. At Leyland “rationalisation of the model range” was a necessary prerequisite for identifying profit centres; for thinning out the dead wood; for redundancy and closure. Speke as “a dedicated sports car centre”, was a two-sided process. On the one hand the No. 2 plant produced a car from start to finish; on the other the entire Dolomite range of cars (whose bodies are pressed in the No. 1 plant) was transferred to Coventry for painting and assembly, and the TR6 and the Stag were phased out. But nothing was left to fill that capacity.

When the TR6 finished, the trim deck was left idle for two years until the closure; the Stag trim and “body in white” areas were also left idle for a year after the Stag finished. While I agree with Ryder’s concept of “rationalising the model range” that wasn’t what happened at Speke. It was more like “run down”.

The plan was for this capacity to be filled by derivatives of the TR7 — in particular the Four Seater Lynx and the V8 model. This, however, was the first victim of the halting of Government funds in 1977.

It was crazy when you think about it. A third of the plant wasn’t doing anything. The Lynx was supposed to be there. And then the Government stopped the bloody money. The first thing they stopped was the Lynx. They allowed cash for pre-production. We had pre-production Lynx on wheels in Liverpool and then they stopped it.

A plant therefore with enormous spare capacity, with everything resting upon the market performance of one product. It would have needed a good car to carry that burden — particularly selling in the most competitive market in the world. The TR7 turned out to be something less than that.

The Closure of Speke: Selling the Car

The TR7 — pre-production name the Bullet — was, to quote the brochure, designed “on the basis of major motoring needs for the next twenty years”. It

was produced with a left hand drive and directed across the Atlantic toward the sports car loving American rich. Its advertising campaign — with wedge shaped garages — stressed the car’s revolutionary features; the TR7 was part of a new, dynamic, expensive world. In sales terms however the car was a flop. To quote the *Sunday Times*:

Speke’s TR7 is regarded inside Leyland as a disaster. How the company came to launch a hard-top model aimed at North America, where drivers want an open sports car, remains a mystery. (January 8th 1978)

In 1977 one senior manager was quoted as saying that “we are selling it only because we are virtually giving it away”. The company’s point by point (and little publicised) explanation for the closure regularly turns upon the market performance of the TR7.

Profitability of sports car business, particularly in the U.S.A., has been declining over the past few years....TR7 has not proved acceptable in the U.S.A. (only 6% of buyers would buy another one)

Much of this has to do with the overall *design* of the car. The production of a hard top model is perhaps the most glaring mistake. (Even if their anticipation of safety regulations on open top models had been accurate, a roll bar would still have been the most acceptable design feature.) But there were many more. The car was not fitted with a radio, it was under-powered; its specifications were altered, almost in panic.

Take the Scotch Trim. They decided to produce the car with a Scotch Trim. Well they don’t wait until cars in the showroom have been sold then get the new car in the showroom and advertise it. They don’t do that. They *announce* the Scotch Trim model before it’s in the showroom. Then of course, nobody wants the old model. It was a cock-up from start to finish.

At the local depot of the Silcock and Collins car delivery firm the people in the office were amazed by the fact that orders for the TR7 — hundreds of car numbers at a time — were not supplied on a Telex print-out but *telephoned* through from the Midlands.

With Ford’s you’d get a Telex, all the car numbers on, destination everything. The TR7 was ordered on the bleeding telephone! The possibility for error was amazing. And by the time you find it out the car with the wrong emission system is being knocked back at a showroom in California or somewhere.

All this wasn’t helped by the report on British Leyland published by Ralph Nader’s organisation. It concluded that there were 27 important defects in 4 models sold in the U.S.A. and argued that British Leyland:

in addition to its callous disregard of owner complaints and warranty claims, has consistently exported to the United States passenger vehicles which present an unreasonable risk of accidents occurring as the result of design, construction or performance.

In its comment *The Times* noted that:

the report could result in an investigation which could have serious conse-

quences for the British manufacturer. More importantly, however, is the prospect that the charges... will win wide publicity. (*The Times*, 13th April 1977)

Leyland complaints grow in US

From Jane Rosen
in New York

A group of American owners of British Leyland cars is suing British Leyland Motors Incorporated for \$15.5 millions for breach of warranty. Mr Ralph Nader's Centre for Auto Safety is helping them. The owners charge that their cars — an Austin Marina and several Jaguars, MGBs and Triumphs — are defective, that they have not been and cannot be repaired, that their warranties are deceptive and that BL is guilty of misrepresentation. The Centre for Auto Safety said yesterday that it and Mr Nader have received hundreds of letters from other BL car owners around the country containing similar complaints. According to the centre's spokesman, the cars are "rid-died with defects" including engine, transmission, and clutch problems and difficulties with the electrical systems. The centre has been investigating BL for several years of any problems that cannot be fixed," he said. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration about 27 alleged defects in the cars. Mr Graham Whitehead, president of British Leyland Incorporated, said the company is examining the service records of the cars involved in the law suit. "I'm not aware of any problems that cannot be fixed," he said.

THE GUARDIAN July 31st 1978

In this context the company recognised that "to compete we have to hold the price down to maintain required sale volume" but "movement in the dollar/pound rate of exchange [a movement which pushed the price up] affected the position dramatically". In effect the company needed to cut the price of the TR7: something which would have put even more pressure upon a plant producing at a fraction of its capacity. As one of the workers put it:

It's a wonder it stayed open as long as it did. But the thing that annoyed me about it really is the blaming. They're trying to blame the men and it's not the men's fault, I don't think the men stood in the way of efficiency.

The Closure of Speke: A Production Problem?

Given the enormity of the problems created by the design and marketing of the TR7 it is ironic that so much attention has been directed at production problems at Speke. In the television programme *Tonight*, broadcast on the evening that Edwardes announced the closure of the plant, Graham Turner roundly attacked the Liverpool workforce. Production was poor, manning levels were too high, as was absenteeism and strike action. After all the plant had been on strike for sixteen weeks — and right through Christmas! The implication was clear. The Liverpool workers were maniacs who had brought down the plant around their heads. The company spokesman was rather more guarded; for him it was the "low quality and reliability" of the Liverpool plant which led to its closure. But the message was the same.

The workers however tell a rather different story. To begin with they argue that the TR7 was a problem from the word go. The problems created in the market (the problems already mentioned together with changing emission regulations in the U.S.A.) created problems in the plant as specifications were altered almost daily. And each change meant an altered job.

There'd been about 3,000 engineering changes on the TR7 alone. They didn't even have an up to date wiring diagram for the actual car, there was that many different modifications made to the wiring system of the car....

In the motor trade, managers talk of something called a "new model effect". Because of the problem of putting a new car on the lines — (the timing and re-allocation of new jobs) they anticipate labour problems — walkouts, strikes, absenteeism. At Speke they were virtually working with a new model for two

years.

And when we got the damn thing right. When we'd gone through all that — and worked on the prototype for the Lynx — they shut the bloody plant. It just doesn't make sense to me. In my view that TR7 is a cracking car now. We've taken all the shit in getting it right and they're taking it off to Canley or Abingdon or somewhere.

The car had been a problem then — but so had management. From start to finish the workers — the men on the line, screwing in the bolts — had to take the brunt of managerial ineptitude. A TR7 prototype was produced with a wind-cooled engine.

They had this car with a windcooled engine and they were testing it in the garage. It was there. They put it on the roller bed and ran the car. We said to them "You'll need a wind tunnel with that". They didn't listen. They ruined the engine. *Two hundred times* they did that.

When the car was in production the tales of "cock ups" are legion.

In a car plant there's the main track and the sub assemble operations. And these have to be in sequence like. The correct car has to be there to receive the correct engine. Well you can get terrible cock ups if the thing got out of sequence. The wrong engines would be going in. This used to happen quite a lot, but one particular time sticks in my mind — fifty cars went down the track all out of sequence with the tyres. They had to change the tyres on fifty cars.

And this is just one story. People talk of duff engines arriving to be installed, untested and dismantled again in the garage, of a shortage of left side panels being rectified with even more right side panels, of roof leaks splashing onto newly painted body shells. "You could fill a book with the cock ups alone".

There is more going on here than the occasional mistake. After all no-one is perfect. But under the Measured Day Work system mistakes become intensified. This system, remember, was introduced into British Leyland by management as a means of obtaining a more detailed control over the work process. It was their way of controlling the job: of pressurising the situation to increase production.

Under Measured Day work, the top management put the fear of Christ up the foremen. All the foreman had got to do was get the production through, keep the line going and get the car from A to Z and once they've passed it on to the next department or to the next foreman they've done their job and got it away and it keeps the Skinners and the Kemps off their back you see. It's like terror tactics if you like.

Under these "terror tactics" the foremen would go to any lengths to get the cars through his section. Quality became a secondary concern.

When we started on TR7, I actually saw cars in the body plant which had literally burst like a bloody balloon. They'd been forced together in such a way that the welds weren't in the right position and the panels had been pushed together with a bar when they didn't fit correctly. The whole thing had been forced together with bars and so on, and when the damn thing got all welded together it just went buff....it just exploded.

Given the pressure no one would stop the line, no matter what. Such a system will work tolerably well (at the expense of the workers' fatigue and stress) if it is supported by a detailed and co-ordinated ancillary structure. Without that it becomes chaos.

Nobody would take responsibility for stopping the line and sorting the job out. And consequently the cars that came off were just rubbish. There was all sorts missing off them, you could see little notes on the window you know, such and such missing and things like that, you would just shove it out on the car park and then bring it back in you know maybe five or six weeks later.

At Ford, for example, the quality control department is a power centre within the production departments. Nothing could be further from the Speke situation.

When I was in B Block, which is the body building plant, the bodies were supposed to be examined you know to see if the quality was alright. You'd get the quality control fellas sticking on the "O.K. label"; and I've actually seen foremen changing the labels that's on them.

And what could you do?

If you were seeing something that was wrong, there was nothing you could do about it because all you could do was say to your forman such and such is wrong or whatever and he'd go, "oh its nothing to do with me" like. And that was about as far as you could get. You couldn't go up to him and get hold of him by the throat and say, "look you know this is wrong" like! Although I often wanted to!

Under the Measured Day Work system the management takes upon itself all the responsibilities of managing production. That's the whole logic of the change. Under piece rates the men can be relied to chase around to get hold of the pieces and the equipment necessary to make up their score: under Measured Day Work (where they had a guaranteed wage anyway) it was none of their business.

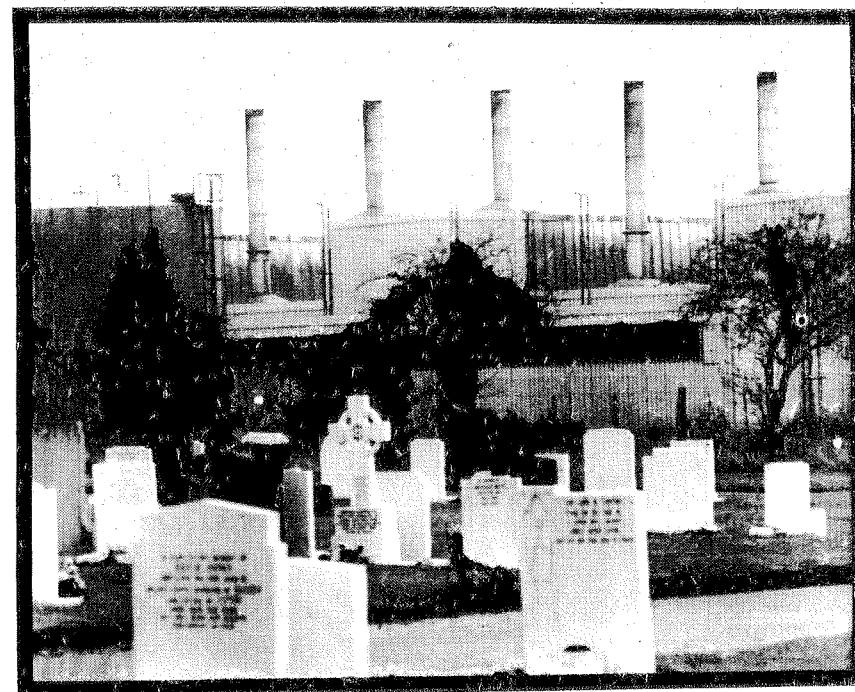
At Speke, the workers feel they missed out in all directions. The plant was built as — and to the last remained — a part production plant. Only one line carried the car through the plant from start to finish on the others the body shell was transported by fork lift trucks. While set up with the optimistic target of 1950 cars a week the plant never approached that level of output. Manning levels were negotiated (and on the company's own evidence these were particularly *tight* levels) on the basis of seventeen cars an hour. And even that rate wasn't reached. On the sound basis of their own experience, the workers are convinced that the plant was incapable of taking, and the management incapable of organising, production at that rate under a Measured Day Work system. With "high morale" and lots of "good will" management might have got away with it. But such "morale" doesn't fall from the skies. It isn't helped by working on a car that is changed every week, supervised by foremen scared to death with the "terror tactics". Neither is it helped when workers are convinced (again on sound evidence) that management didn't give a damn about them: dirty scousers.

Pride and dignity didn't come into it with those fellas. All they'd say was "look at the money you're getting"; as if we weren't worth a decent life sort of thing; as if we ought to be grateful to be paid by British Leyland. It was like that with overtime. They didn't see it as an additional payment for inconvenience caused to us — staying on late and so on. They simply saw it as a penalty which we were imposing on them.

This attitude combined with the general inefficiency to produce a situation which was — in many respects — difficult to tolerate.

There were all sorts of little things. There was always something *wrong* in that factory. Your pay would never be right, and you could never get it sorted out. The canteen arrangements were terrible. There were no welfare facilities whatsoever — no-one you could go to see if you had a problem, or need a sub. They couldn't even organise our redundancy payment properly. We just had one cheque with no explanation. It was just a "don't care" sort of place.

It is with irony (and not a little anger) that these men can note that while they are on the dole these managers have been redeployed to other plants in the company.



The Speke No. 2 Graveyard

FOUR WHO PULLS THE STRINGS?

So the Speke No. 2 plant was closed. After two years of production problems, and a year dogged by successive lay-offs men, on strike, were told that the closure was inevitable. Edwardes' statement made the issue clear:

The Business Plan has already determined that by wastage and other means we must slim our Labour force in order to reduce our overhead costs and improve our profitability. In addition it is inevitable that we should consider whether to close an assembly plant and concentrate the production at another large site. It is essential to eliminate fixed overheads and this means the elimination of facilities. *And this becomes a question of deciding between plants.*

Speke was to close. TR7 would be relaunched. Its bodies would be pressed in the Speke No. 1 plant, assembled in Swindon, painted in Castle Bromwich and finally assembled at Canley. To many people on the dole this doesn't seem to be a particularly sensible or inevitable chain of events. In spite of the problems of TR7 production; in spite of the cock ups and the incompetent management, the workers of Speke cannot see as inevitable, the closure of a modern, purpose-built factory. As one of them put it, "It doesn't make sense to me. They've sacrificed the most modern plant for an antiquated old shed in Canley".

To an important extent, it doesn't make sense. In Europe there is excess capacity in the motor industry, yet more plants are built by companies determined to force others out of the market and thereby solidify their own market share. As the *Financial Times* put it:

Nearly everyone in the industry agrees that there is over-capacity world-wide and yet the major companies continue to build-up their international capabilities. They take the view that there will be closures in the industry and then the situation will be different. (10th May 1977)

To this extent the workers at Speke are correct to see their position within British Leyland to be the consequence of "capitalists, making capitalist kinds of decisions". They are right too, when they talk of themselves being set up. One branch committee member put it like this:

If there's one thing I admire the likes of Edwardes for it's how he got away with it. Perhaps admire is the wrong word — more a grudging respect. Edwardes played his cards exactly from the position he was in. From his stand point he played his cards perfectly. In saying that though it must be seen as a criticism of ourselves — for letting him get away with it. We didn't see our position as clearly as he saw his.

How did he get away with it?

The Need for a Tough Line

Within the company senior managers had, for some time, been voicing the opinion that a tough line had to be taken with the workers. In mid-1977, for example, one senior executive claimed that:

To abandon the Mini would be the greatest thing that could happen to this company. Sometime, someone has to realise that you can't cry wolf too often.

A view that had already been propounded by Anthony Harris in the Lombard column in the *Financial Times*.

Even trouble-prone companies have periods of peace and it is worth reflecting why this should be: it is usually because the workers see a real threat of bankruptcy bringing the game to an end. Such a threat can also, occasionally, produce a real reform of labour relations, and a new understanding.

The workers had to be brought to their senses. They had to be made to realise that the N.E.B. is no socialist planner or capitalist paper tiger. In 1977 the swords came out.

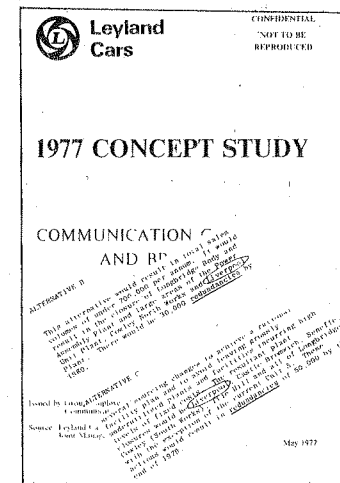
Edwardes, the Speke workers note wryly, took up his appointment on DAY ONE of their strike. They note too that his reputation at Chloride was built upon his successful defeat of a strike at the company's Manchester plant.

That was it you see. Crack the toughest nut first. Crack it hard and the others fall into place. That's what he did at Chloride, that's what he's doing at Leyland.

They point to the significance of the "mutuality clause" at Speke. That in this particular factory, management had to discuss manning levels with the workers affected by them.

You can see what they were thinking. Speke — we can't do what we like there, we've got to discuss with the workers what we want to do. Sod that....

Clearly there is something in this. Clearly too, if you are committed (as Edwardes is) to the severe reduction of manning within the company, to shed three thousand in one go is a useful beginning. And (through his position on the N.E.B.) he was already familiar with the "Concept Study" drawn up by the Leyland Cars Joint Management Council: a study which listed four possible alternative plans for Leyland — two of which included the closure of Speke.



But (politically) it would still be a tricky thing to pull off. A lot of strings would have to be pulled. In Liverpool they are sure that that is just what happened.

They were dictating our moves. They were forecasting our moves and we made the moves. In all honesty it was the only moves we could make. It was like somebody writing the script for us and we were following the script word for word.

The Strike

The workers were informed of the closure while they were in the sixteenth week of a strike. This was the first occasion that the plant had been halted by mass action. (The same plant had been described by Pat Lowry as "the pearl" in British Leyland's industrial relations set up.) During that strike the press had played on the vulnerability of the Speke plant and upon the mindless militancy of the workforce.

The press did the job for Leyland during that strike. They laid the ground for the closure pretty effectively really. It was all our fault.

But was it? Why were the men on strike at all?

In 1977, throughout the Leyland plants, management had been tightening up on manning. Seconds were being cut here, minutes there. A man here another there.

They were forever tightening standards in our plant. Especially after the TR7 was introduced. There was one occasion I will never forget as long as I live. They retimed a job in the paint shop and wanted to cut it by 3 minutes — and not an hour, three minutes a car. These were the jobs on the wet deck; the roof of the TR7 and rubbing down the head lamp castings (which had a very tight time). They wanted to put those jobs together, and retime the job. We had already established agreed times with them on each of the jobs but no — they wanted to retime, so we said O.K. Well lo and behold we'd lost 3 minutes. Nothing had changed in either of the jobs! We argued like hell. The boss came down with slide rule, calculators and what have you. But we couldn't agree. It was obvious to us that they had simply tightened up their standards.

This tightening of standards was carried out throughout the plant. In 95% of the cases the shop stewards and their members had agreed to the new timings under the mutuality clause in the agreement. There remained a rump of 5% which could not be agreed. In each of these cases the shop stewards involved had prepared detailed arguments and evidence in support of their contribution that the new timings were unreasonably tight.

There was no bloody minded approach by the stewards. They gave valid and reasonable arguments to justify the manning levels. Management never gave any argument back. They'd adjourn and go upstairs to their supervisors for instructions. We wouldn't see them again for about a week. And then they had the cheek to say that we had been "unconstructive, unco-operative and generally inefficient".

In between the lay offs in the autumn of 1977 management announced that they no longer intended discussing the outstanding manning problems. The new manning levels (based upon management's timings) would be introduced and people would have to accept it. People, of course, didn't accept it.

It is fair to assume that management expected that this would be the case. Under the P.E.P. Agreement they had the option of giving three months' notice of termination on any part of the agreement. Such a tactic (had they used it) would have successfully isolated the 5% who had not agreed the new manning levels. There is no doubt that in different circumstances this is just what they would have done.

But in 1977 Leyland management had the N.E.B. breathing down its neck and were stuck with a car which couldn't be sold. Shop stewards (in spite of the much vaunted participation structure) were not able to obtain sales figures for the car but Wally Nugent, the TGWU convenor at Silcock and Collins the car delivery firm observed that:

At the car delivery end you get a pretty good idea of how a car is going, and I was convinced right through 1977 that the TR7 wasn't a goer. We didn't have room to store the TR7. In the end we had to put 600 of them in the Liverpool Airport. We were bringing cars in to be shipped with grass growing through the engine!

Writers on industrial relations in the car industry have long since observed the relationship between market cycles and the incidence of strikes. For any number of reasons strikes can — at times — be in the best interests of management. No-one will be convinced that Speke management lost any sleep over the stoppage in 1977. Allan Rimmer, a journalist for the *Runcord Guardian* examined this in a series of articles which, many of the Speke workers feel, was halted prematurely. In one of the articles he noted that:

The figures show that even after months of strikes and lost production when not a single car was produced, there were still 2,303 Bullets in the show-rooms. The argument goes that if production had continued as normal — 12.5 cars an hour on a 17 hour shift — the market would have been swamped.

Ron Powell, a young maintenance electrician who had written a critical note to the *Sunday Times* about Leyland Management was asked to take part in B.B.C.2's *Brass Tacks* programme.

They told me that they had three managers who were prepared to be interviewed (in silhouette, to conceal their identity) and say that the strike was provoked. It didn't happen like but the people at the B.B.C. told me that they had the evidence.

In a depression, when they're up against it any idea of management "honouring" agreements goes to the wall. "Economic circumstances" dictate otherwise. At Speke the workers note that:

When it suited them the management paid lip service to co-operation and mutuality. But when things didn't work in their favour they simply reverted to the old view of "do as you're told and get on with it".

gaining structures in the face of solid opposition from TGWU stewards in particular. In this context Hugh Scanlon addressed a press conference in October with a suitable (if implied) reference to *Alice in Wonderland*.

Everyone is clear in their own minds about the seriousness of British Leyland's situation. I do not think that anyone doubts that the government, the N.E.B. and the company have said what they mean and mean what they say. When we go to Tuesday's meeting we will have come to the crunch. (*The Times*, 14th October 1977)

The logic of Dobson and Edwardes had won the day: the Labour bureaucracy was convinced that the solution of Leyland required sacrifices, and these sacrifices had to come from the workers.

The dilemmas so created were made clear during the sixteen week strike at Speke. In that strike management argued that the shop stewards, by failing to make a "genuine and constructive attempt" to resolve the manning disputes, had exhausted procedure. As such the dispute should go to a higher, national, level. The claim was laughable — and the national officers and (later) ACAS were in no doubt that the local procedure had not been exhausted and that (in the rules of the game) management was out of order. In the tenth week of the strike a delegation of three stewards visited London to discuss the situation with Jack Jones and Moss Evans.

We went down there expecting Jonesy to read us the Riot Act but he didn't. He said very little. Moss Evans said he understood our problem and that we should "hang on to the mutuality clause". They were his words. As we left Jonesy did say that we should remember that British Leyland needed to be viable.

A straight-forward trade union dispute therefore; over a clause which everyone agreed should be honoured. But why wasn't the strike made official?

I think they were terrifically embarrassed over our strike. They didn't really want to talk about it. The T & G Executive Committee *never* discussed our strike. When you go on strike your local official has to fill in what's called a D1 form. Our local officer filled it in but they sat on it in the Regional Office. It wasn't sent to Transport House. Grenville Hawley (the TGWU national officer) had asked Farrer (Regional Secretary) to hang on to it! There was a terrible amount of intrigue going on. It stunk, heavens' high, the lot of it.

As it turned out (and as a consequence of intervention by Executive members from the North West) the strikers received a grant from the union in lieu of strike pay but formal official backing was not forthcoming. Not something to inspire confidence in the future! And the future followed on very quickly as the closure was announced.

During 1977 changes were taking place within the official personnel of the two major unions in the Confed — the AUEW and the TGWU. Scanlon was retiring, his Executive Council had shifted to the Right and Duffy was standing in the wings. At the TGWU Jack Jones, the architect of the Social Contract was on the edge of retirement. These changes coupled with (and related to) the absence

of any alternative strategy for dealing with the crisis produced a more than usually deadening effect within the trade union bureaucracy. People were pretty much convinced that Leyland had come to the end of the road. As hardened, rational men they had no anticipation of a mass movement resisting big business. A quiet cynicism best typifies the dominant view of their membership. When it comes right down to it, at the end of the day the members will take the money — they will take the money.

In his book *Nineteen Eighty Four*, George Orwell writes of "Newspeak"; the official language of the new state. People gave this name to Richard Nixon's public statements. Eddie Loyden noted it in his dealings over the closure.

At a meeting between M.P.'s and National officers, the question was asked: "Look are you fighting the closure?" They'd reply with the official union policy — "our policy is not to accept closure or to negotiate over redundancy payments".

Newspeak conceals the reality. It established a veneer but lacks substance. The Speke workers learned this to their cost, for as the closure date drew nearer, the official position gently altered. On 18th April, for example, the Confed's declared policy was this:

The T.U. negotiating side have refused to accept the principles of the closure and are calling for resistance of the proposals and for opposing of any work normally done at the Speke No. 2 plant to any other plant with the Corporation (Confed. Minute 18th April 1978).

A week later there was a slight change.

A lengthy discussion took place and points of view were expressed on the disastrous situation that could emerge to the whole of the Leyland Corporation if a major confrontation took place at the present time. Reference was made to the repercussion redundancies that could take place if TR7 production was ended completely arising from pursuing a policy of non-acceptance of TR7 work in other plants (Confed. Minute 26th April 1978).

At the next meeting (after the Company's final offer) the Liverpool convenors were not allowed to be present, and in the discussion that took place this resolution was passed:

Executive Council recognises that the negotiations have obtained the best possible offer that can be got from the management and that we advise our members to accept this offer (Confed. Minute 12th May 1978).

They *will* take the money.

And what of the Company? What was Edwardes and his new team of managerial experts doing in this period. Smiling you might think. But they were also pretty busy, trying to set the seal on the Speke closure. Gamesmen to the last.

The architect of the "closure package" was Leyland's Director of Labour Relations Pat Lowry. A small balding man, who had learned his trade in the Engineering Employers Association, and had survived through all the Company's organisational crises. He had passed Edwardes psychological tests. In announcing the closure Lowry stressed that the company realised the effect a

closure would have upon the Merseyside area.

with the knowledge that any plant closure causes serious human problems, the company is determined to act in such a way as to minimise any individual hardship.

Wherever possible there would be redeployment of labour. For "those who would lose their jobs" Lowry promised sympathetic treatment. In these ways the company would meet

its legal and its contractual obligations, and would also accept freely a moral, social and humanitarian burden beyond that imposed by law.

You could almost believe he was doing you a favour. Certainly after seventeen weeks on the stones you could be excused for thinking (or hoping) that this was a kind man doing his best to help you out.

There was some fantastic talk in the plant. The *Daily Telegraph* had quoted some figures, I believe and there were the negotiations at British Steel. People were talking about tens of thousands of pounds. How they were going to spend it. But the company hadn't mentioned cash. It was all left to people's imagination.

The reality turned out to be something different. The document outlining the redundancy payments they would offer the Speke employees began by making things clear.

The Company has said it will give generous redundancy payments provided the closure of the plant can be done in an orderly way. This means we require co-operation in producing the run out quantities of vehicles — stock-piling of sub-assemblies — co-operation in the removal of plant and equipment when we want it — continued oiling and shipment of Dolomites in No. 2 plant until No. 1 plant can take over — no restriction on contractors working in No. 2 plant — the labour rundown to be to the management's timetable. No restrictions which will hinder the smooth transfer of the model to other plants, by any Liverpool employees, hourly paid or staff.

That didn't sound very sympathetic. And the money wasn't very generous either. A mass meeting overwhelmingly voted the offer out of court. They were not on. But (of course) it wasn't the final offer. Just a move in the game — testing the water. As closure date drew near (just before the meeting of the Confed.) a new offer appeared. A *final* one this time and with all the warnings about the need for orderly rundown — any trouble and you could forget the cash. This offer shifted the balance. A very high proportion of the labour force at Speke had worked in the plant for less than two years. Employed in 1976 to produce large numbers of the TR7 they had no entitlement under the Redundancy Payments Act. In its final offer the Company shifted the balance of the funds in their direction offering an, across the board, increase of twelve weeks pay. Very cunning. Tear them apart. At a mass meeting a shop stewards recommendation to reject the offer and fight the closure was turned over. It was an emotional meeting. Some men fought, others cried, one shop steward had a heart attack. But the vote was to accept. The plant was to close without a fight.

And one man noted with some sadness:

I always used to think that Liverpool people stuck together. But I know it's a fallacy now. They didn't stick together....but they were frightened.

A Game Lost

There is no doubt that Edwardes won this game. But in recognising this the game analogy ends: because what he is playing with is peoples' lives; their feelings and emotions. Modern capitalism is increasingly about numbers — to be manipulated until they came out right. But the reality of the numbers is people. People living, producing, making their way. In the new N.E.B. game an empty plant makes sense. Within the logic of profit and loss, within a world where expensive cars drive past slums, an empty idle plant can be made to seem sensible. To people kicked out onto the streets it just seems crazy; crazy and sickening.

PA RUSH 1 CARS

OFFICIAL BRITISH LEYLAND STATEMENT THIS AFTERNOON SAID:

"THE COMPANY HAS COME REGRETTABLY TO CONCLUSION NOW NO ALTERNATIVE TO PROPOSAL THAT NO. 2. PLANT IN SPEKE HALL ROAD MUST CLOSE

IN INTERESTS OF COUNTRY AS A WHOLE.

MF NNA RUSH 1 CARS 1705

FIVE FIGHTING THE CLOSURE

So Edwardes and the Company won; there's no doubt about that. Neither is there any doubt that they had a lot going for them. A lot of friends in high places too. But it wasn't a racing certainty. Edwardes knew that a fight at Speke could have upset his plans. He was worried by the first vote at the mass meeting and the possibility that the struggle at Speke would reverberate through the rest of his plants. So we are still left with the question: Why were they allowed to get away with it? Why wasn't there a fight? At least one of the lads had to face up to that question soon after being made unemployed:

I've got three brothers who work in Linwood in Scotland. And when I went up there last week they said "why did you sell your job? We were expecting a fight from you in Liverpool".

A lot of people, in Liverpool and elsewhere, were saying the same thing. Eddie Roberts, a local TGWU official put it this way:

Five years ago if you'd said that Standard's would be closed down without a fight, no one would have believed you. It would have been unbelievable. But it's gone. Two years time people will be saying "Speke — there used to be a car factory out there once didn't there?" It's gone.

Such thoughts still make a lot of people angry and upset. One man, a senior shop steward and branch activist, put it this way:

It was a funny feeling when that last car went down the track. It wasn't like the holidays.... it was the last car that would come out of that plant. I can't properly describe the feeling. It was anger in a way: I was angry with the company, angry with the union, angry with the members for letting them get away with it — and in the end angry with myself for not doing enough to stop it. It was a hell of a funny feeling.

So, what went wrong? What else could have been done? This is a question that many people have been asking over the past months. To answer the question we have to begin by taking another — last — look at the company.

The Giant Corporations

A fundamental change has taken place in the structure of manufacturing industry in Britain over the last twenty years. In 1950 the top hundred manufacturing firms controlled about one fifth of the output; in 1970 they controlled about one half and the estimate for 1980 is two thirds. The multi-plant, multi-national corporation represents the most flexible form of capitalism. Within

the structure of the company production can be moved from plant to plant; the labour force of one plant can be played off against another; plants can be closed down and new ones opened elsewhere. In this phase of capitalism local economies can change extremely quickly — if not overnight, certainly over a period of a few years. British Leyland is fighting for survival within the world of the giant corporations: and we have seen that the fight is being conducted on their terms and organised by the Labour Government. All this has severe implications for rank and file trade union activity.

The structures of the companies have changed — and so have collective bargaining arrangements. Twenty years ago a shop steward in an engineering company would be mainly concerned with negotiating over the piece rates paid to his members. It was still a tricky job, being the "man in the middle" but to an important extent it was a job that could be sorted out on the section or at least within the plant or the branch. Not so today when companies are moving toward corporate bargaining structures with nationally agreed time rates for employees in all their plants. It's not so long ago either that joint shop steward committees were frowned upon as "unofficial bodies", and when combine shop steward committees were completely beyond the pale. Today these committees are placed in the centre of the collective bargaining arena. And at Leyland's this was complicated even more by the participation scheme which was introduced as part of the Ryder package. In this report Ryder made clear the role of such committees.

Workers' representatives need to be given more information about their company so that they can better appreciate management's problems and co-operate more constructively in solving these problems.

The logic of this was made clear by Frank Chater, Divisional Organiser of the AUEW.

Radical changes in workers attitudes are needed if employee participation within the new BL is to succeed. Participation means that we'll now be involved in decision-making with all the responsibility that brings. Employee representatives will no longer have to answer just to their members. Their actions will also be acceptable to the public, who will have a large stake in the reformed corporation. (*New Statesman*, 2nd May 1975)

At Speke, they opted to involve themselves in the participation scheme. Their experience wasn't a happy one. Locally the stewards found themselves receiving information that was either confidential or too bulky or complex to be properly understood in the course of a meeting. Nationally, the Car Council, was not informed of — much less participated in — decisions relating to the closure of Speke.

In considering the general situation within the company one branch committee member at Speke expressed the opinion that:

On the unions' side, nationally, since the Ryder report was accepted and more so since the toolroom strike, there has been a close collaboration between the government and a number of ad hoc but very influential committees which had been set up. These primarily consisted of

Confederation officials with a sprinkling of senior shop stewards. These committees had made decisions which, by and large were very favourable to the government.

What all this points to is the increasingly complex pressures that are now being brought to bear upon shop steward committees operating in factories within the corporate sector. Increasingly — whether they like it or not — they are being brought into an arena which extends beyond the confines of the section or the plant. It was in reflecting on this, and the closure of Speke, that one of the shop stewards said:

We got brought into an arena that we'd never been in before. Only a few of us had the experience of these kind of things.

Preparing for the Struggle

In an open discussion on "what went wrong" an old branch-meeting stalwart made his feelings plain:

Nothing was done wrong. The stewards made the correct resolution to fight the closure and it was voted down. The bastards never put their hands up. That was what was wrong. They're not trade unionists. They've sold their jobs.

A strong, and understandable reaction. In Liverpool they have a term for people who won't look you in the eye, who are always on the look out for themselves and sod everybody else. They call them "no marks" — people of no account. There were some no marks at Speke. Blokes who had taken jobs through the strike and had got themselves fixed up (or so they thought) with another one after the closure. They voted for the closure, and didn't want to know about a struggle. But they were not all like that. To quote one branch committee member

It is vitally necessary to differentiate between the different types of lads in the plant: some just wanted out; some were prepared to fight; some were ready to be won either way. It was the task of the shop steward committee to show them that they had a future — highly paid at that — if they dared to fight for it.

Another man puts it like this:

The worst thing that you can allow to happen is for there to be a vacuum. As soon as you have a vacuum, the boss gets in there and fills it with his ideas. And that's what happened to us.

A situation of crisis is always a crisis for leadership also. It puts to the test the relationship between leader and led; activist and rank and file. In reflecting upon this one shop steward at Speke reflected upon how,

I think some of us are a bit inclined to want to do things by ourselves if you know what I mean — without the membership. But when you come right down to it you can't do bugger all without the members, your rank and file trade unionist. You certainly can't fight a closure.

At Speke, as we have seen the period which led up to the announcement of

the closure was not the best basis for a struggle. After a series of lay offs and a long, unsuccessful strike people are not at their toughest. Debts build up; worrying things happen. Under these conditions the prospect of a golden handshake seems all the brighter. As one lad put it:

I believe we were conditioned into accepting it. I was willing to fight to save my job but I've a wife and three kids and we lived on £15 social security for about six months altogether. We suffered.

The hardship was one thing, but the problem was deeper than that:

I've got no argument against the shop stewards. I think all in all they did a great job; and I would say that I'm grateful to them. But if there is one thing it was the seventeen week strike. It all came a bit impersonal if you know what I mean; we lost touch with each other.

Car workers know all about isolation. Working in massive plants you are tied in everyday, on one repetitive job, in one particular section of the plant. Everyone split up from everybody else. Laid off, at the drop of a hat for a reason you don't know, or understand. But at least you can meet people in the canteen, talk (or shout) to people across the line. Have a laugh now and again.

When on strike, particularly on a mass strike, car workers come together at mass meetings. They come together to hear the information, to shout, and to vote. Then they return — to Wigan, Widnes, Speke — to their homes and their families. Isolated again. Helping with the shopping and the children; watching the T.V., reading the *Echo*; sleeping in.



During the sixteen week strike the Speke workers met for just two mass meetings: the first which voted to strike and the second which voted to return to work to fight the closure. There were a number of reasons for this. Throughout the strike (until the announcement of the closure) the situation changed

little, if at all. In a sense there was nothing to have a meeting about. More than this though was the way which the stewards felt about the very issue they were on strike over. Only about 5% of the members were directly affected by the issue.

What we had were a series of manning disputes. Now manning disputes must be sorted out on the sections. It's not right for the mass to decide what the minority should do in their actual job.

The stewards preferred to organise picket duties in such a way that stewards would always be on hand to discuss the issue with their members.

The system worked fairly well. If people wanted information there was always somebody on hand to give it to them. There was one incident when a deputation came to Transport House. The *Echo* really blew it up like. Well I was there and I explained the situation carefully to all of them. And they accepted it. That the strike was right and we had to carry on.

The strike had to carry on because the company (by forcing the manning issue in the way that it had) had challenged the "mutuality clause" in the P.E.P. Agreement. A clause which many of the union activists believed to be "unique in modern industry". The shop stewards didn't want to risk losing it. To an important extent (because most of the workers at Speke had never worked on a Measured Day Work system without a mutuality clause in operation — "they don't know what a car plant *could* be like") they didn't trust the judgement of the membership on this issue. Whatever the reasons (and people still argue over it) what remains as a fact is that there were no mass meetings held during the strike, and that this did have an affect upon the members attitude toward fighting the closure. Left alone, you come under a lot of pressures. You and your family — one woman, married to a Standard's worker, remembers how,

at work the girls had no sympathy for the Standard's workers. I defended them you know — the issue they were on strike over; but they just believed everything they read in the *Echo*. They weren't sympathetic at all. It was a bit difficult really.

And this was made worse by the defeat; the announcement of the closure. Looking back, many people agree with the view expressed by this shop steward.

In retrospect, personally, I feel we should have had more mass meetings; not just one or two or even three. In retrospect — even if we'd lost the vote and gone back to work — we would have been in a better position to lead the membership in the fight for their jobs.... But we were fed out a line by the national officials. Told we were going to win the strike. We were conned in my opinion. And then when we did have a mass meeting when we knew we weren't going to win the strike and the plant was going to close. The tone of that mass meeting was terrible — you just couldn't speak to people.

A bitter, acrimonious return to work then — with three months to go until closure day. Not long to get back on your feet, get things sorted out and take on the whole thing once again. But one mass meeting *did* vote overwhelmingly to fight: the other accepted the closure on a split vote. In the end, with the union

against them as well as the bosses and the government it was too hard — too much of a risk. Eddie Loyden put it like this:

In a situation like that what working class people want to know is "when did we last win one?", "what are our trade union leaders doing". They look around and they see that there's nothing down for them.

And one of the shop stewards:

That membership was looking for guidance. They came to that meeting looking for certain assurances. Assurances that the shop steward committee couldn't give. If we had had one national official on that platform saying "Liverpool will not close" there is no doubt in my mind that we would not have lost the vote.

And a branch committee member:

Grenville Hawley voted against the recommendation at the Confed. But it was easy that; because he knew he was going to lose. Why didn't he come and put his vote to some affect in Liverpool? In the end all they (the membership) could see on the platform were the people who had taken them through a seventeen week strike without a mass meeting. And they were afraid that something like that would happen again.

Clearly, the string pulling we talked about in the last section had deep and complicated effects. But given this fact that no help was likely to be forthcoming from the leaders of the labour movement, couldn't rank and file organisation have done it by itself? Couldn't organisation at the grass roots level have provided the confidence and assurance which would have produced a fight? To talk like this is to talk of a campaign.

A Campaign?

To begin with, of course, there is once again the problem of cash. At Ford when the workers organised a party campaign, people were saving up for a year before the strike commenced. At Speke they were on their uppers. But there is more to this than money; and fighting a closure is very different from organising a strike for more wages. If you loose a strike you can still go back — defeated, but you can still go back. Not so with a closure. You stand to loose everything. As such, to organise a campaign against a closure is quite a complicated business. It involves struggle both inside and outside the plant; it involves the mobilisation of a broad base of support, politically, within factories and the community.

For people to fight they have to think that they have at least a chance of winning. And, in this case, that was dependent upon support. Support which could come from a number of different sources. The trade union organisations are more than the officials. Each of the constituent unions has its own structure of lay representation. The 6-612 Branch of the TGWU, based upon the Speke No. 2 factory, passed a resolution to its local automotive district committee, demanding that the TGWU fight the closure on its own by giving official support to its members at Speke. Unfortunately, that committee (made up of lay representatives from each of the car plants on Merseyside) never met. It was not quorate

and the chairman (the convenor of the Speke No. 1 plant) was not present. His absence — and the general lack of urgency revealed by this non-meeting — says a lot. It also serves to raise questions about other sources of support — particularly from other plants, within the company and elsewhere.

At both the mass meetings Derek Robinson, the convenor of Longbridge and chairman of the British Leyland shop stewards combine committee spoke and promised the workers the support of their workmates in other plants. This support was never tested (you have to fight before you really find out); and partly this was because workers at Speke didn't believe it existed. There are several reasons for this. Speke is the first plant to be closed in British Leyland; as such it was the first time that the combine committee was faced with a test like this one. Formally, the committee was committed to the principle of opposing closure and, in the event of a struggle, not accepting work from Speke at any other Leyland factory. But there was a trap in this. Production at Speke was intricately tied up with production in the Coventry area. While this tie-up can be the source of strength it can also lead to sectional conflicts. For example, during the seventeen week strike the Coventry plants were laid off and the Speke stewards remember, with some resentment, that Eddie McGarry (the Coventry convenor who sits on the national automotive trade group committee of the TGWU) amended their resolution on the strike, advising a return to work. And Coventry stood to lose a lot if the company pushed the logic of its statement that:

By reason of the model's severe lack of profitability and the amount of money which would have to be spent in re-establishing the model in the US market, it would be a prudent commercial decision to discontinue TR7 completely. Instead however we propose to reduce the fixed cost base by transferring assembly from Liverpool to Canley.

If Liverpool closed they'd have work; if Liverpool fought there was the possibility that the whole thing would collapse. It was to be a test of nerve.

In the weeks that led up to the final vote, lorry drivers were returning to Liverpool with reports of placards at Canley abusing the scousers. Assuring them that they would get no help.

That had a big effect I think. It really upset people. From a trade union point of view I explained to my members the kind of problems that people would be having at Canley too.

They listened to this but it didn't help too much. Some of the workers had heard of Eddie McGarry the Canley convenor: but very few of them had met him in the flesh. Very few of the Speke stewards had close personal contact with their opposite members in the Midlands. Increasingly "the Midlands workers" appeared as an unknown quantity.

Shall I say that it would have helped if McGarry had come to one of our meetings. Because that's our tie-up with Coventry and he is Vice Chairman of the combine. But perhaps we should have gone down there more often. I believe we should have gone down there with flying pickets and everything.

A more broad based (and social) support within the company would have helped then. So too would such support in the Merseyside area. In an attempt to generate this, the shop stewards committee were involved in calling a meeting at the Everyman Theatre in Liverpool.

Really what we needed to do, and what we should have done more of, was to get more people involved. At the Everyman meeting we sent invitations to all sorts — to Wilson and Gordon Oakes, and all of them. Most of them didn't show up though. Ogden showed up. And Loyden and Heffer helped us — especially Loyden. But the rest aren't worth a carrot.

It is in talking about the Labour Party, the Government and most of the local M.P.'s that the Speke workers get most angry. One shop steward put it like this:

I don't mind about Edwardes. I know what Edwardes is. He's a bleeding capitalist. I don't mind him carrying out capitalist kind of decisions. What I object to is people who are supposed to be on our side, being a party to these decisions. Harold Wilson is a local M.P. and he played no part whatsoever in our attempt to save the plant. He was too busy making money, writing his memoirs.

The campaign that was developed to 'save Speke' received a quick and immediate response from Callaghan — "Forget it". Lobbies of Parliament found people waiting around and getting nowhere.

Eventually we met one junior minister. I don't remember his name but he told us that the plant had to close because it wasn't tooled up to produce the Lynx and the V8 model. We'd been producing the damn thing! He knew nothing about it!

All this convinced the Speke workers that they had been set up and "let down very badly by our own people".

All of that made it clear to me that it was a government decision. They thought: "the people in Liverpool will vote Labour no matter what happens but we can't be sure of Coventry, and Oxford and places like that". They went and sold us down the river.

An Alternative Strategy?

In developing a campaign, organisation and contact is one thing (and more of both would have been helpful in this case). But what is also necessary, to make up a coherent strategy, is *argument*. At Speke they needed an argument that could convince people that the closure wasn't inevitable. Once Edwardes' logic was accepted (it 'becomes a question of deciding between the plants') — even to the slightest degree — the door is open for *sectional* conflicts rather than mass action. The Edwardes' logic (the logic of capitalist production) had percolated right through British Leyland from the national officials to the workforce.

The struggle against closure, the struggle against rundown and unemployment is a fight against this logic. Unless it is fought, we will always end up with what one steward describes as:



"No discussion, it's the BOOT I'm afraid"

The worst thing about this whole episode for me — the sight of the working class tearing itself apart.

The branch committee of the TGWU 6-612 branch are now convinced that a strategy needs to be worked out to prevent this from happening again and again. And this strategy need to operate on a number of levels. To quote Eddie Loyden once more:

I think the only strategy which will work in the long run is the nationalisation of the whole of the motor industry. But it's no good watching people drowning and tell them "look we're building a raft and there'll be room on it for you like". People need a bloody life belt now.

As things stand at the moment British Leyland (under the N.E.B. and Edwardes) is putting the last stamp upon "nationalisation" for working class people. For them state ownership has meant redundancy — from start to finish. Just now though there needs to be a demand for an alternative strategy within the company — and this means that shop steward committees will have to get outside of "traditional collective bargaining issues": the age-old negotiation over wages and conditions. At Speke the stewards raised any number of alternative plans for the Speke factory — Mini production that was being shipped to Seneffe in Belgium; Range-Rover production that was needed, but couldn't be met at Solihull. On all of these suggestions the response was the same.

It was identical to the manning dispute. We were putting up all the arguments and we were getting nothing in reply. Just "No, no, no". "The decision to close the plant is final." At no point in any of the discussions that took place did management ask for an adjournment to consider a particular alternative. The answer was "no". No discussion.

So much for "participation" and "consultation". The Speke experience has made it clear to many people that if workers are to get involved in the planning of production (and they couldn't possibly make a *worse* job of it than Leyland management) then it will need to be on their terms, not the bosses. They will have to make *demands* of their own and not just be informed of management plans. Late in the day at Speke, the stewards discussed the possibility of producing an invalid car. Then, they talked with Eddie Loyden about the possibility of opening up the plant with other alternative products — such as a low pollution engined car — produced jointly with the workers at the local Lucas Aerospace factory. Such a strategy had a certain appeal.

I don't think we should be producing bleeding sports cars that nobody can afford anyway. That plant could produce something useful.

But it was too late to get anything organised. Not too late however for them to note that the threatened closure of the Lucas Aerospace factory has been withdrawn temporarily in the face of demands based around the combine committees *workers'* plan for the company. Not too late for them to realise that.

Long ago. As soon as the Stag Trim lines were left empty we should have been preparing for this. We should have been *demanding* more investment into this factory.

SIX CLOSEDOWN AND UNEMPLOYED

So the Speke No. 2 plant is closed. At one time there was a rumour that the machinery in the paint shop was being cleaned and returned to position covered in a protective film — moth-balled. However it seems that this was stopped after a few days. To quote a maintenance fitter:

We did take all the chains out of the track and clean them and put them back in. But after that we were ripping everything out.

People now talk of the lines being widened, of a Japanese buyer.... Rumour upon rumour. Meanwhile a new track is being laid at the Swindon works, body production of the TR7 is planned for the autumn and Leyland are recruiting labour. Just now, in Liverpool the clever money doesn't hold out much hope for the No. 1 plant at Speke.

The way things are going I can't see it. On the television, the night of the closure was announced they had this bloke on saying that it makes no sense to move bodies from the No. 1 plant to the Midlands. Precisely — and that's why there was a No. 2 plant! Without our plant I don't hold out any hope for the No. 1. It's going to hit them next.

Eddie Loyden calls it "the job bulldozer": destroying jobs as it has destroyed the centre of the cities. And it isn't going to stop.

Walk around Liverpool with an unemployed Standards' worker, or travel on a bus, visit the Garston "Job Centre" or Labour Exchange; everywhere men bump into ex work mates. "How are you managing your retirement?" "Hello, fixed up yet?" "Working?...." They talk about enjoying the rest, for a while at least.

As far as the car industry goes I'm glad in a way I'm out. I don't think I'd go back, it's a hell of a bloody strain. When I got out of Ford's I didn't particularly want to go back in the car industry but the economic circumstances dictated that I had to. So in a way I'm not sorry, it's a sole destroying bloody bastard of a job like. You're never easy, you're not secure, you have that feeling of insecurity all the bloody time as if you're on the knife edge if you know what I mean.

So — off the knife edge for a while — people find they can relax. They talk of missing the activity of the place, the "push and thrust of it all". Particularly the union activists. But away from it all, they talk with their children, and their wives, decorate the house, tidy the garden. "All those jobs that's been put off for years". Two men who take their families regularly to Cornwall, camping,

planned to

drive down slowly, take it easy like. That's one thing you can say, time isn't all that important — we won't have to rush back for the start-up this year!

Away from the pressure, and the night work, people have a chance to live a bit. But in all this, the dictates of "economic circumstances" are never forgotten. The redundancy money — the "limp handshake" they received from the company — will not last for ever; or anything like. Having the money all at once, in a cheque for one or two thousand pounds (more than that in some cases) was exciting in a way, like winning the pools. If you could walk straight into another job that's just what it would be like. But that's the catch. One or two might strike lucky (that's what makes the offer a temptation) but in reality the payment means what it says. It is a payment in exchange for your job. As one of the workers put it:

It's perfectly straightforward. I had a job that was worth £4,000 a year to me. The company has bought it off me for £1,500. That's what has happened.

And another reflects:

As we were coming out of the meeting (the last one that accepted the money) — I think it finally came home to me. That was it.... a good job, a comparatively well paid job shall we say; it was gone. I went for a pint by myself to think about what had been lost.

A lot of people have been reflecting on that over the past months. Some of them did it in pubs. Everywhere there is talk of someone or another who has been permanently on the beer since the closedown. Others gamble: the fifty pence double becomes a fiver on the nose. Maybe you could really strike it lucky. Still more men harbour their resources, talk of themselves becoming "really mean", splitting it up into little piles and spending it slowly, a bit at a time. But what is common to them all is the fact that the money — the money that talked at the mass meeting — is moving away from them.

I got a few bob. A couple of thousand in fact. It's getting spent. Slowly but surely. But it's getting spent.

Some of them have got jobs. In July about forty members of the TGWU branch had got fixed up, as drivers, caretakers, labourers, the occasional milkman. Some other had hopes; someone to put a word in for them. But that's still not many out of two thousand production workers. And in all this, one or two things are becoming very clear. To begin with, there are precious few jobs available on Merseyside. Between 1960 and 1976 the Liverpool area experienced a halving of the local labour force as 106,000 jobs disappeared. In the last eighteen months even this, astounding, rate of decline has increased, with another 16,000 workers being made redundant. Birds Eye, English Electric, Lucas, the docks, the ship repair yards — the story is the same. And the closure of British Leyland at Speke, with the Government's seal of approval, puts the finishing touch to it. Rundown is the acceptable face of British Capitalism as it reassembles itself in the multinational world. For the men on the stones in

Liverpool the picture looks rather different.

Jobs are hard to come by then; and that is hard enough to take. What is worse, perhaps — what really sticks in the throat, are the *kind* of jobs being offered. As the big corporations “shake out” their labour what is left to be distributed at the job centres, are the offerings of “the small firm sector”. One man was sent with a card to a garage that had advertised for a paint sprayer.

I was a paint sprayer at Standard's but when I went there I had to explain to him that the only experience I had was with spraying. He wanted a sprayer, a panel beater, a metal man — all in one. And for fifty pound a week!

To many of the unemployed this experience has come as a bit of a shock. Some, however, were prepared for it.

We were paid about £73 a week at Standard's with a £12 night allowance for the weeks we were on nights. We complained about it, we felt that the night allowance wasn't what it should be — but that was the rate. With the new pay deal we could have been on something like £90 a week. Before the shut down I was going into the job centre before I caught the bus out to the plant — and in those months the *highest* paid job I saw was £57 a week — and that was for a skilled man! I was telling them this at work. I don't think some of them believed me. They know now though. They know now.

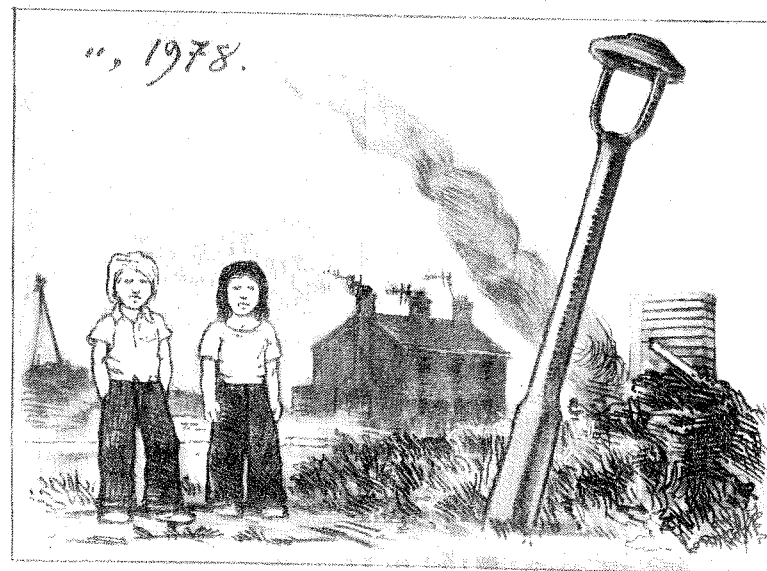
To get a job that pays a reasonably high hourly rate, you need to work for one of the big firms. And the big firms are a bit choosy about who works for them: especially during a recession. One bloke had a good idea of what to expect.

My brother worked at Standard's and he packed it in about a year ago. He went after 80 jobs and never got a start. He must have been blacked. If you worked for Standard's for any length of time that's it — no work.

While this man was prepared for disappointment, others had high hopes of being able to shift over from Standard's to Ford's — “Henry's place — the Big House in Halewood”. But as one, ex-Ford worker, pointed out at a branch meeting:

You don't understand. Ford doesn't want car workers. Car workers are the *last* people they'll employ up there. They want agricultural workers, shop assistants — people they can mould to their system. They don't want car workers!

Even after closure, and with unemployment, the corporate gamesmen continue to play the odds. The job centres, the queues for the dole, the blacklist.... and it doesn't stop there. In Liverpool — as in most big cities — shop steward committees have attempted to counteract “voluntary redundancy”. Workers who take a handshake voluntarily are not allowed back into the same plant. Some union committees object to jobs being offered to any worker who has volunteered for redundancy payment in any plants in the area. The Speke closure, however, was not a voluntary affair. It was an enforced closure, eventually accepted by a majority of the workforce on the recommendation of their national officials. In this context therefore news of men being “blacked by the union” at Dunlop and Ford produced an angry response at a meeting of the



6-612 Branch of the TGWU. In a lengthy discussion the situation became clearer. There was no "black" operating at Ford — it was just that management had said there was. At Dunlop six ex-Standard workers had been taken on, but without the usual induction procedures, and over the heads of 600 other unemployed workers on a waiting list for work at the factory. They had got themselves fixed up. The convenor had requested that the men be employed on a temporary arrangement until the situation was clarified. The company refused, and dismissed them. That was the story — the truth of the matter. One young lad in the hall shook his head:

To me it just stinks. They're not prepared to take any of us on but they want to blame the union. Blame the union all the time. It really stinks to me.

And so it does. So does the whole thing. From start to finish. There is ample ground for the public enquiry that the Branch is demanding. Ample ground too for thought; for considering the lessons to be learned from it all. British Leyland is in a crisis. So too is Chrysler. The Speke plant is the first plant to be closed but, as things stand at the moment, it will not be the last. The fact of Speke's closure is armory for the corporate bosses. Part of the softening-up process to stand them in good stead when they turn on the Midlands. The myth of Speke, created by the company and the government and propagated in the media, will be used to terrorise other workforces. Unless some lessons are learned.

Closures have to be fought against. But if such struggles are to find support from the men who work on the lines, more than moral exhortation will be needed. There has to be both a will to fight, and an organised way of fighting. Structures and contacts have to be built which break the isolation of the plants from each other and from the communities and areas where they are situated. Public meetings, joint plant meetings will all help to give people the idea that closures *can* be fought effectively, that they *will* receive support, that there *is* an alternative future possible for them in the car industry. At the root of all this the logic of the N.E.B. has to be exposed for what it is — the logic of capitalist production — and it has to be resisted. For this logic can, at best, produce routinised boring jobs and purposeless work. Increasingly it is producing unemployment and plant closures. It leads to the production of cars that are unreliable, and often dangerous. It sees the centres of our cities destroyed by motorways. In resisting this logic, a genuinely *workers'* plan for the motor industry and for transport (a plan based upon the needs, aspirations and knowledge of workers) could play an enormous part. The 6-612 Branch of the TGWU hope that this booklet, and any discussion it creates, will help in this struggle.

Copies of this booklet can be obtained by shop steward committees and trade union branches on special terms. For details contact:

Branch Secretary,
6-612 Branch, TGWU,
38 Caldwell Road,
Allerton,
LIVERPOOL, 19.

The closure of British Leyland's No. 2 plant at Liverpool Speke in May 1978 was one of the most important and significant events to have taken place for some time. The closure—and the way it was accomplished—contains sharp lessons for workers in the car industry, and in the Labour movement generally. For these reasons the 6-612 Branch of the TGWU commissioned **Huw Beynon** to produce a report getting at the details behind the public statements. **What happened at Speke?** puts the workers views on record. Read what they have to say. Read what happened to them, before it happens to you!

